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World Chronicle

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GUEST: **Peter HANSEN**
Commissioner-General
United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)

JOURNALISTS: Ian Williams, *Tribune* (London)
René Slama, AFP

MODERATOR: Michael Littlejohns

UNRWA

Peter HANSEN, Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), elaborates on the difficulties the Agency faces in providing services to the Palestinian refugees, who now number 3.3 million. UNRWA employees 23 thousand people, 99 per cent of whom are Palestinian. Lack of sufficient funds has prevented the Agency from expanding services to meet the rising population growth of the refugees. Its work is also hindered by restrictions imposed by the Israeli occupying authorities on the movement of its staff between Gaza and the West Bank and Jordan. Unemployment among the refugees is extremely high, and most of them depend on assistance provided to them by UNRWA. Mr. Hansen believes that it is in the interests of the international community to support UNRWA in its services to the Palestine refugees until a final settlement to their problem is reached.

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Director: Ivan Stoynov
Production Assistant: Ellen McGuffie

ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Since it began operations in 1950, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, or UNRWA, has been providing education, health, relief and social services to millions of Palestinian refugees scattered throughout the Middle East. Following the signing of the Declaration of Principles between the PLO and Israel, the Agency launched the Peace Implementation Programme to improve infrastructure and to create jobs for Palestinians. But in recent years, UNRWA, which is largely dependent on voluntary contributions, has suffered from continuous funding shortfalls. Will the Agency be able to continue to provide services and fulfil its commitments and obligations? And what impact will the peace process have on its operations?

Our guest today, Peter Hansen, is Commissioner-General of UNRWA. Joining me to talk with Mr. Hansen are Ian Williams of the *Tribune* of London and René Slama of AFP.

Mr. Hansen, welcome to World Chronicle.

HANSEN: Thank you.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Hansen, in your many years of service for the United Nations, you've worn several hats, and you've worn a different one on this programme in your several capacities. We welcome you in your fairly new job. Tell us a bit about UNRWA and what you're actually doing. What do your operations there consist of?

HANSEN: Well, as you mentioned, there's a quite large number of Palestinian refugees who rely on UNRWA for their education, for their health, for their social services. In fact, we now have 3.3 million refugees who are registered with UNRWA and recipient of UNRWA services.

LITTLEJOHNS: How does that compare with the number when UNRWA began?

HANSEN: When UNRWA began operations, in 1949-50, there were about 900,000 refugees. That number has grown with very rapid population growth and new registration since then to now 3.3 million. And UNRWA is a very, very unusual international organization in that it is very operational. It provides governmental services to a population that is –

LITTLEJOHNS: Governmental services?

HANSEN: Governmental services, if you consider that primary education, primary health care, social welfare and support of the poor with food aid and so on are governmental services. And UNRWA has a very direct role in itself delivering these services. So UNRWA has a staff of no less than 23,000, among them about 12,000 teachers, several

thousand doctors and nurses, sanitation workers, social workers, and so on. So it is a very, very large governmental agency by nature.

LITTLEJOHNS: That must be about the largest number of staff in the UN system.

HANSEN: It is by far the largest number of staff in the UN system. I venture to guess it is almost as much as the rest of the UN system put together. Or close thereby. But it's a very unusual Agency also in that more than 99 per cent of the staff are Palestinians. They are locally employed Palestinians who work for UNRWA as teachers and doctors and engineers, et cetera, and there are only about 130 international civil servants managing this very large programme.

LITTLEJOHNS: But you mentioned the unusual aspect of being like a sort of government in the area. What are your relations now with the Palestine Authority?

HANSEN: Well, now that UNRWA has moved its headquarters to Gaza, where we are headquartered—

LITTLEJOHNS: From Vienna, where—

HANSEN: From Vienna, where the Agency had to live as a refugee itself, as it were, since the late 1970s, when it had to leave Beirut because of the civil war. UNRWA has had very close relations with the Palestinian Authority since its creation, but as close as these relations are, they are not exclusive relations in the sense that most of the refugees live not in Gaza and the West Bank, but they live in Jordan. In fact, in Jordan there are as many Palestine refugees as in Gaza and the West Bank put together, and in Syria and in Lebanon, where there are significant numbers, and particularly in Lebanon refugees who live under very, very difficult circumstances.

SLAMA: What kind of relations do you have with the Israeli Government?

HANSEN: Well, we have the relations that we have by virtue of having operated for many years in areas that have been occupied by Israel. We cooperate with the Israeli Government, and we are very much dependent on their good cooperation in order for us to move around the region. We cannot get from Gaza to the West Bank without crossing a checkpoint called Eretz, and we cannot move on to our other headquarters in Amman without crossing another checkpoint at the Allenby Bridge. We have in the past also worked very closely with Israel because most of the provisions, procurements going to the Agency and so on, pass through Israeli ports in Ashdod and Ashkelon, and we therefore do have a close working relationship.

SLAMA: Have you noticed any significant change in relations since Mr. Netanyahu was elected?

HANSEN: I am trying to scrutinize this as best I can. I am sure that a new Government always has a number of very immediate and pressing tasks they have to take up

before they can turn as full attention to the issues that we represent as the former Government did, but I am hopeful and I'm confident that the Netanyahu Government will realize that the refugee problem is one that will not easily go away.

LITTLEJOHNS: Have you had a meeting with Mr. Netanyahu?

HANSEN: I have not yet had a meeting with Mr. Netanyahu.

LITTLEJOHNS: But you expect to?

HANSEN: I would expect to. I had several meetings with his predecessor over a short period of time, but, as I said, Mr. Netanyahu has had many pressing problems. I do hope that he will come around and find time to look at the very pressing problems that UNRWA is facing in not having the freedom of movement that we feel entitled to and that is necessary for our efficient operations.

WILLIAMS: You were talking about the Oslo Agreement, and most of the attention on Palestinian refugees has obviously been concentrated on the occupied territories.

HANSEN: Yes.

WILLIAMS: But you also mentioned the people in Lebanon and the difficult conditions there. There have been several very disturbing stories. In the British press recently there were some stories that there was a deal being cooked up with Saddam Hussein in Iraq to, in effect, ship the Palestinian refugees from Lebanon to the Iraqi desert as part of some type of local settlement. And one thing that the Lebanese Government seems insistent on is they will not in any way grant any type of residence rights to the refugees there. But on the other hand Israel shows no intention of allowing these people to return to Palestine. These people are the forgotten refugees in a sense, even though you're dealing with them – obviously you can't forget them. Do you think enough is being done to bring their plight to international attention?

HANSEN: No, far from it. In a previous capacity, as Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, I dealt in one way or the other with every refugee crisis in the world, and the refugees in Lebanon are very, very special in the sense that not only are their physical conditions, their material level of suffering, on par with the worst in the world, but furthermore, these are refugees into the third generation, who, if they look down the tunnel, will find it very difficult to see any light down there. You have refugees today whose grandparents came from Palestine, and these refugees can look forward to their own offspring, grandchildren, not having as bright a future as they would all hope. It is this particular dimension of hopelessness that strikes you about the refugee situation in Lebanon. And one thing that I have learned both from the refugees in Lebanon and elsewhere in the region is that the capacity of the Palestinian people to absorb pain and carry losses is something that is also forgotten and not seen. You usually see it when the pot boils over,

when it is brought to the point that people act in desperation, but people usually in the press do not get a sequence of events up till that point where it boils over, and there the capacity of the Palestinian people to have borne these sufferings and this humiliation with great dignity is something that cannot but strike you when you live in the area as I now am fortunate enough to do.

WILLIAMS: But they don't bear it indefinitely. Until some solution is found for the refugees in Lebanon, there's a continual source of instability for any peace solution.

HANSEN: Exactly, exactly. That is true. The situation does break from time to time. And that is why it is in the interests of the international community to provide the opportunity to this Agency, UNRWA, to give these people at least the minimum of support to live a halfway decent life, and also for this Agency, which over many years has helped sustain the national identity of the Palestinians, which I think in the long term is also a very important prerequisite for a peaceful solution to the refugee problem in the region.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Hansen, you mentioned their hopelessness. Does that mean by contrast there's some degree of optimism on the part of the other refugees in the Israeli occupied territories and in Jordan?

HANSEN: I would mention hopelessness first of all in relation to refugees in the rest of the world. Most refugees expect their situations to be very, very provisional and to be able to return and to be given opportunities where they are. These opportunities the refugees in Lebanon do not have. With regard to the refugees in Gaza and the West Bank, they would, as it were, have the advantage of having their own authority to relate to, but still with the conditions as they are today in Gaza and in the West Bank one certainly cannot talk about a great hope until they can see hope for conclusion of the peace negotiations. It is very, very difficult in an area like Gaza, if you compare it to Western Europe or North America. In Western Europe or North America, you talk about a society being at danger of falling apart if they have 10 to 15 per cent unemployment; in Gaza you can talk about not unemployment but employment rates of 10 to 15 per cent, or a little more. The majority of people are without jobs, and as long as the closures continue, they do not have much prospect of getting a job and providing their families with decent living conditions.

SLAMA: In recent years there was a decrease in the contributions, the financial contributions to the Agency. How do you explain this lack of enthusiasm in funding?

HANSEN: Well, overall there have not been reductions in the contributions to UNRWA. It is true that a few countries, and I shall not mention them here and now, have not been able to, or willing to maintain their level of contributions, but it is equally true, and I think very, very noteworthy, that a number of countries have considerably increased their contributions to UNRWA. Norway's Foreign Minister just informed me that they will

increase from 75 million kroners to 85 million kroners, a growth of more than 10 per cent. I've just been in Brussels to sign a convention with the European Union that will increase their significant contribution by 4 or 5 per cent. Sweden, which has had to cut a lot of programmes domestically and internationally, are increasing their contributions. So the picture is not all that bleak. Some countries are in fact realizing that this is a very good investment in humanitarian terms and in political terms. Our problem is that it increases our problem by an increase in the numbers we are dealing with in Palestine. In 1950 there were 900,000 refugees; we now have 3.3 million, and next year we will have 4 per cent more, and so on every year. So that means unless we have our contributions increasing by a rate of 5 per cent or more a year, we will not be able to maintain the level of quality of our services. We might even have to think about cutting some services. And this is not just cutting services in schools and in medicine, this is a message, as the Palestinians read it, to them from the international community, that we no longer take our obligations towards them as seriously as we used to. And that's a very terrible message to send in the middle of a peace process.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Peter Hansen, Commissioner-General of UNRWA.

WILLIAMS: One little known aspect of UNRWA's work, as I remember, a few years ago, is resolution 194, which even the US voted for, which specifies that the Palestinians have a right to return or be compensated. Am I right in believing that UNRWA is the sort of official custodian of the claims of the Palestinian refugees for the property they left behind? And has anybody dusted those off recently to see if those claims would be sort of activated in any way as part of the final settlement?

HANSEN: Well, UNRWA is very much associated with that resolution, and it is mentioned as a basis for all of the annual resolutions in the UN, or most of them, if not by number then by a relevant UN text. We have not dusted off a number of these files because any action on the part of UNRWA dealing directly with the final status discussions about refugees is hardly going to help the progress there. Whenever these settlements are made and agreements are reached, I'm sure that UNRWA as well as the rest of the international community will become very busy in implementing them. But we will see when that happens.

SLAMA: When you have a situation like last month – serious violence, closure of the territories – how does it affect the work of your employees and your Agency?

HANSEN: Well, first of all, the closures have meant that we have not been able to have our own staff come from home to office and report to work. If they do that, they can only do it by sneaking over a border, which can be very dangerous and unpleasant for the

staff members. We have been in situations where less than a third of the staff could turn up for work. And that of course is a very, very difficult way to run a big enterprise, when two-thirds of your staff are being physically hindered from reporting to work. We have had great difficulties in having our own staff, also the international staff, pass quickly and efficiently between our various places of operation in Gaza and the West Bank. And of course when all hell breaks lose, as it did some weeks ago, we cannot keep our staff doing their normal daily work but have to have them engaged, as they have been, in—still getting from place to place—bringing medical supplies with ambulances, bringing the sick, doing everything that is necessary to get around and, again, ameliorate the suffering in a situation like the one we saw.

SLAMA: In the past, there were people detained also, UNRWA employees detained in Israeli prisons. Is this still the case today?

HANSEN: We do not, to my immediate recollection, have UNRWA members long-term detained in jail. When you have a staff as large as UNRWA's, it would only be normal that once in a while there will be a situation where a staff member is detained for whatever reason, good, bad, or invalid. When that is the that point, we of course are always very, very vigilant in following it up with the authorities, be they Israeli or be they Palestinian, or be they Syrian or Lebanese, to follow up to see that our staff, provided that they have behaved correctly, which UNRWA staff in principle always do, are treated well according to the law.

WILLIAMS: This was one of the problems that was raised, if I remember rightly, by Syria and Lebanon at the time of the move from Vienna to Gaza. Obviously the move made sort of psychological and even economic sense, in that it meant that money was going into the Palestinian areas, but just how difficult is it for you to deal with your clients in Syria and Lebanon when you're operating under the double disadvantage of being in an enclave within a State that's in a state of hostilities to the other two States?

HANSEN: No, it is very difficult. It means that we cannot have a number of the meetings that we have to have with donor countries and host countries at our headquarters, because the Syrians and the Lebanese cannot come to Gaza. We cannot have it in Lebanon either, on the other side, because certain other countries can't easily travel to Lebanon. So we have to have these meetings in Jerusalem or in Amman, and that requires travel across some of these checkpoints I referred to earlier, and that indeed does raise difficulties, issues that I have to raise and have raised many times with the Israeli Government, and that I really hope we will see a solution soon.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Hansen, you mentioned the response of a number of European countries to your financial problems. What amount of assistance do you get from rich

countries in the area? After all, you've got a number of countries that are making a great deal of money from oil. Are they coming in with substantial contributions to UNRWA?

HANSEN: Well, the overall contribution from the Arab countries to UNRWA amounts to about 1 per cent of our budget.

LITTLEJOHNS: So it's very small.

HANSEN: It is not nearly as big as it ought to be. Saudi Arabia has provided resources for some of our institutions—a nursing school, and Kuwait has provided some funding for our regular budget, but it is not nearly enough, and it is something I've had the opportunity to discuss with the Arab countries, that the issue will remain an international issue and an international concern even if they should increase their contribution significantly.

LITTLEJOHNS: What is the reason for their reluctance to contribute more substantially?

HANSEN: Well, the Arab countries have historically said that this is a problem that was created by the West, and the West therefore ought to bear the consequences and pay the price for it.

LITTLEJOHNS: But it's the refugees who are paying the price.

HANSEN: The refugees are paying the price, and that price could be reduced very much if the entire international community would assist. I take it that one can have a legitimate intellectual discussion among historians about who did what when, but I would suggest to my Arab friends in the region that it is more useful to look a little bit ahead and look at the human aspect in this situation than having a rather arid discussion about what took place 48 years ago.

WILLIAMS: There have been allegations within the Palestine Authority itself that President Arafat sort of wants his hands in every pie, and that he wants to control, he wants a great deal of control over everything that's going on in there. Have you had any turf wars with the Palestine Authority about who controls the schools and clinics, or whether—whose thumbprint has to be on the checks as they go through?

HANSEN: We have had no such conflicts with the Palestinian Authority. I think the Palestinian Authority understands full well that it is in their interests to enable UNRWA to operate with the freedom and with the integrity that we need, and they have been completely respectful of that, from the side of the Palestinian Authority.

SLAMA: There were also serious accusations of violations of human rights on the part of some Palestinian officials in Gaza and the West Bank. Have you seen that yourself?

HANSEN: I have not seen these cases of—or reported cases of violation of human rights, but we are all aware that there is a very strong movement on the part of non-

governmental Palestinian institutions to safeguard their rights, and I think the fact that these issues are being written about is a positive trend. It is not in all countries in the world, after all, where you have issues of this nature up for as open a discussion as you have it now in Gaza and the West Bank. But clearly there are improvements that could be made, and I am sure that there is something that, again, the international community misses no opportunity to signal.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Hansen, a number of Palestinians who've emigrated have done rather well, and some have become multi-millionaires. Are they contributing at all to UNRWA or to improving the lot of the refugees in the area? And if not, have you thought of approaching them?

HANSEN: There are, as you say, many Palestinians who have done very well in the world, very many of them, incidentally, because they received a very good basic education from UNRWA. And many of these have also turned to ways in which they could help their countrymen in a refugee position. That has very often been through foundations and activities and work that has not been directly channelled through UNRWA. And there is a need for all kinds of aid. UNRWA does not pretend to have or claim that it should have a monopoly in this area, but, quite frankly, we could use more extensive contacts with this Palestinian community abroad and try to illustrate to them and convince them that it would indeed be very welcome and very useful if they could help UNRWA help the Palestinians.

WILLIAMS: Presumably if the chairman – if President Arafat has his way and the Palestinian State is declared, then UNRWA will become redundant and be able to hand over – it's functioning as the Palestinian civil service at the moment – it will be able to hand over many of its obligations. Do you envisage this happening in the near future, that you will be sort of – the State will legitimize you out of a job?

HANSEN: Well, there's nothing we really would want more than to be negotiated out of a job, because the day we could close UNRWA would be the day that the refugee problem had found its just and comprehensive solution, and that would be a very happy day indeed. I will not venture to speculate how long that would last, but if I had hoped that my first, now serving, three-year term would end with closing the door on or closing the key in UNRWA's door, I'm afraid that would be too optimistic, and UNRWA will have a lifetime that goes well beyond that. But UNRWA should not exist a day longer than necessary.

LITTLEJOHNS: What is your budget? We have only a few seconds left. I gather that your budget is relatively small, considering that you have such a big operation.

HANSEN: Our budget is relatively small, because for all our Palestinian staff we are paying local salaries, salaries which, by the way, do not make me feel like a good employer. I think that our Palestinian staff deserve more than they are receiving, but I cannot provide

salary increases without having the money for running the hospitals and the schools. Our budget is in the neighbourhood of between $400 and $500 million, that is, short of half a billion.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Hansen, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of World Chronicle. Our guest has been Peter Hansen, Commissioner-General of UNRWA. He was interviewed by Ian Williams of the *Tribune* of London and René Slama of AFP.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of World Chronicle.

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